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APPLICATION OF ATTACHEMENT THEORY TO EQUINE-FACILITATED THERAPY

Abstract: Over the past two decades there has been a growing body of evidence, clinical and anecdotal, that equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) is a powerful tool for social workers and mental health clinicians. Recent research studies have begun to identify, name, and explain the mechanisms of EFT as a treatment tool for individual clients. However, EFT lacks a unified theoretical foundation; many studies lack an explicit theory altogether. Strong empirical support begins with a strong theoretical foundation, the research field lacks a unified voice for the scientific value of EFT. Attachment theory can guide the understanding of how EFT operates and can support more rigorous inquiry to evaluate its effect in mental health treatment. This article reviews the human-horse relationship in the context of attachment theory and concludes with a recommendation for research to strengthen the empirical base of EFT in social work practice.

Keywords: attachment theory; equine-facilitated therapy; horse-human bond; human-animal interaction; animal-assisted therapy

Introduction

Horses have historically been an active contributor to the social, cultural, and economic facets of western society. Stories emphasizing the human-horse bond have become *New York Times* best sellers (e.g., *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, *Justin Had a Morgan* by Margarete Henry, *Riding Lessons* by Sara Gruen, *Eighty-Dollar Champion* by Elizabeth Letts) as well as major motion films (e.g. *Black Beauty*, *The Black Stallion*, *War Horse*, *Seabiscuit*, *International Velvet*, *The Horse Whisperer*, *Hidalgo*). People who have worked directly with horses or have witnessed therapeutic riding programs have also written about their experiences. As seen in Rupert Isaacson's *The Horse Boy* and Temple Grandin's *Animals in Translation* (both in book and film), the transformational impact of the horse-human bond has helped individuals overcome mental health challenges. Although the anecdotal stories of these powerful relationship have been chronicled for reading and viewing pleasure, the benefits have not been recognized or widely adopted by the social work field as a resource and tool that is adaptable for practice.

Recently, research journals included studies on the contributions of horse-human relationships in the remediation of social, educational, and emotional problems (e.g., Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011; Burgon, 2011; Karol, 2007; Rothe, Vega, Torres, Soler, & Pazos, 2005). However, there have yet to be published research specifically evaluating quality standards for effective implementation (Wilson, 2015). Greater understanding of the mechanisms and utility of EFT can expand its potential use among social work clinicians and extent of its benefits to mental health clients.

Historical Foundations of the Human-Horse Relationship

Historically, horses have played a vital role in sustaining the well-being and health of humans. Dating back to 700 B.C., Greek mythology tells of the powerful horses Pegasus, Chiron, and Iberia. In 500 B.C., literature cites horses supporting the rehabilitation of soldiers. In 400 B.C., the influential philosopher and Greek cavalry officer Xenophon taught his cavalry the importance of the horse-human bond. He specifically wrote of how soldiers are to support their steed, and instructs his cavalry to be “clear and firm.” He also reminds them that “when our horses are afraid we should lead them slowly and patiently to the object of their fear, show that there is nothing fearful in it, least of all to a courageous horse like him; but if this fails, touch the object yourself that seems so dreadful to him, and lead him right up to it with gentleness” (Hallberg, 2008, p. 78). Xenophon’s supportive advice about how to guide a horse through a fearful situation mirrors the empowerment framework used by social work practitioners. Social workers guide and facilitate the therapeutic process, they often reach out and “touch the object...that seems so dreadful” as a means to help clients work through their hardship.

The Rise of Equine Industry

Over time, modern Western culture lost sight of the power and virtue of the horse. Civil society required horses to serve as work animals to till fields, pull carts, and help create a vibrant society. Horses were the work machines before the car and truck took over. When their use as machine began to erode, horses became the sport of the elite. Rather than valuing their history and potential, horses fell from functional necessity to sport and recreational hobby. As of 2005, there were 9.2 million horses in the United States. Two million people owned horses with an additional 2.6 million people involved in the equine industry in some capacity, including breeding, competition, and as service providers and/or employees (American Horse Council, 2005). This equates to approximately 1 out of 63 people in the United States engaged in some capacity with the equine industry. The U.S. economy profited “...\$39 billion annually with... a \$102 billion impact on the United States economy when the multiplier effect of spending by industry suppliers and employees is taken into account. Including off-site spending of spectators would result in an even higher figure” (American Horse Council, 2005). Although the rate of participation and profit is impressive, it would be even greater if EFT were explicitly included as a means of participation and profit. The economic contribution of EFT has yet to be factored in to the profitable sector of the equine industry.

The Rise of Equine Facilitated Therapy

Use of EFT as an intervention to address social and emotional problems remains on the periphery of social work practice. The use of EFT specifically refers to the horse (*equine*) *facilitating* the relationship between client and clinician to meet the *therapeutic* goals. This is in alignment with animal-assisted therapy which is a structured therapeutic intervention with deliberate inclusion of an animal in the therapeutic treatment plan involving a licensed therapist who guides interactions between a client and an animal to reach specific goals (Chandler, 2012; IAHAIO, 2014). The inclusion of an animal is designed to accomplish outcomes believed to be difficult to achieve without the animal as collaborator (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). In EFT, the horse is a collaborator in the therapeutic process who aids in building social rapport (Chandler et al., 2010; Matuszek, 2010) between clinician and client (i.e. traumatized youths) for therapeutic purposes. Furthermore, it is the attachment that forms between the client and horse that aids in the therapeutic process and relationship building (i.e. affect management and attunement).

Although the purpose of this article is not to explain the various terminology, nor to rationalize one term over another, it is important to understand that there is an abundance of verbiage. There are nearly a dozen different terms that refer to the same intervention—though implemented in slightly different methods—including equine-assisted therapy, equine-assisted experiential therapy, equine-assisted learning, equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine-facilitated learning, equine-facilitated psychotherapy, therapeutic horseback riding, psychotherapeutic horseback riding, and hippotherapy. It is arguable that the abundance of multiple terms referring to the same or very similar intervention is a deficit of the practice.

The lack of understanding about the methods and utility of EFT in practice has led to an underappreciation of the potential positive effect of the horse-human bond. By taking a step back and understanding the theoretical foundation of the therapeutic intervention, social workers can better understand and apply the EFT methodology to support vulnerable populations.

EFT for Youth with Traumatic Experiences

Specifically, EFT can be seen as particularly beneficial for youths with social-emotional mental health challenges (Harris & Williams, 2017). While horses provide positive therapeutic effects for a variety of populations, we specifically focus on the role of attachment theory to explain the benefits of EFT for youths living in poverty and exposed to inter-personal violence. In 2012, approximately 1 in 5 adolescents had a mental disorder and increased risk for struggles with school, use of drugs and alcohol, and the development of chronic illnesses in adulthood. State child protective services agencies received approximately 3.4 million referrals, involving an estimated 6.3 million children with alleged abuse or neglect. An estimated 678,810 unique children were victims of abuse or neglect with an estimated 1,640 children who died as a result of abuse or neglect. Neglect was the most common type of maltreatment at 78.3%, followed by physical abuse at 18.3%, then sexual abuse at 9.3%. Psychological maltreatment, abandonment, and medical neglect were also high, but less than 10% (United States Department HHS/HRS, 2015). Youths living simultaneously in violent homes or neighborhoods and poverty are even more susceptible to the barriers that stunt and altogether prohibit socio-emotional development.

Exposure to clinical support serves as a primary prevention, but, as noted by research and field experience, not all children who may benefit from clinical social work access services. Furthermore, many youth and families may internalize stigma or fear in accessing clinical social work. Thus, EFT is a supplemental source of support for youth who may not feel comfortable or able to access clinical support in isolation. EFT can potentially reach the most at-risk youths than clinical social work alone because of the allure of a novel experience in conjunction with therapeutic treatment.

The Need for Theory-Based Research and Practice

The demand from the community to use EFT has continued to grow exponentially since the 1980s. As a result, certification boards and licensing organizations have been established for the variations of practice. While this growth is exciting, it is expanding faster than the research base, further jeopardizing the legitimization of EFT as a clinical practice. The growing popularity of EFT programs in spite of lack of empirical evidence accentuates the need for developing valid and reliable studies to explore the benefits of EFT in social work practice (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Trotter, 2001). The use of attachment theory as the base for EFT can facilitate the development of rigorous, scientifically valid and reliable studies that can operationalize the theory and capture empirical data.

The studies that have been published in the peer-reviewed literature have been challenged for various reasons including small sample size, lack of control groups, varying populations within studies, non-standardized measures and limited replicability. Nimer & Lundahl (2007) conducted a meta-analysis across various modalities of AAT. Of the 49 AAT intervention studies included in their analysis a “moderate effect size in improving outcomes” across domains of “...behavioral problems, and emotional well-being” (p. 225) was evident. AAT research has a range of sample sizes varied from 1 to 153 (O’Haire et al., 2015), though most of the equine literature has an upper range of about 30. The majority of evaluative findings on EFT remains in the grey literature, which leaves a gap in the scientific debate and stalls the development and use of EFT in social work practice.

Anestis, Anestis, Zawilinski, Hopkins, and Littlefield (2014) analyzed 14 peer-reviewed published studies and highlighted multiple threats to validity and reliability. The authors conclude with “...we recommend, in view of the current evidence base, individuals in need of mental health services avoid seeking out EFT and treatment centers avoid practicing this approach... until a strong research foundation for this treatment emerges” (p. 1129). Anestis et al.’s (2014) claim that EFT should be avoided is extreme; rather than supporting further research, they establish barriers to the field. Though caution is warranted, the research is growing and findings do support the implicit and explicit benefits of AAT (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; O’Haire et al., 2015), and specifically HAI (Krob, 2015).

Taking an alternative stance while still advocating for future research, Lentini and Knox (2009) propose that EFT should be limited to clients who are not reached by conventional methods (2009). This proposition is logical, supports EFT as a complementary therapy, and in alignment with the definition of AAT. Lentini and Knox (2009) outline a proposed study plan that social work researchers can use and

build upon to develop the evidence base for EFT including a multi-center study, with standardized, controlled, longitudinal data collection. Their research uses a mixed method and includes biofeedback data (i.e. heart rate, cortisol levels, and brain activity). Social work practitioners and researchers should collaborate to conduct quality research in a timely manner; in fact, the field is primed and ready to do so.

Theoretical Foundation and Application

To date, literature have typically been reliant upon single case-study or small sample sizes (Fine 2016). Qualitative analysis methods commonly used include ethnography, participatory research, pre-post self-report. Each proposed theory holds some scientific validity, but some are stronger than others. Strength is determined by the theory's ability to describe, explain, predict, and control for environmental circumstance. Some theories are best used to describe a certain aspect of the horse-human relationship, whereas others are best to describe the holistic experience. Another issue in the application of theory by researchers is the parceling of EFT into its parts, or specific mechanics, then fitting each part to a theory. For example, while the biophilia hypothesis seeks to explain the person-in-environment concept in that a client will act differently at a stable than in the city, it does not predict or control for the relationship between the client and the horse (Fine 2016). EFT required a theoretical explanation of the holistic process, not merely its parts.

Critics have charged that EFT lacks a firm theoretical and research base (Bachi 2013; Carlsson 2016; Messant 1987). This article builds on prior discussions of the importance of grounding EFT, and animal-assisted therapy generally (Geist 2011), within a holistic theoretical framework to guide both application and evaluations of EFT as a therapeutic intervention. Amiot and Bastian (2015) proposed an array of theories in their overview of animal-assisted therapy, including its intersection with evolutionary processes (i.e. biophilia hypothesis), development (i.e. attachment theory), normative factors (i.e. ecological systems theory), and gender and individual differences (i.e. feminist theory). However, the authors do not name or suggest a particular theoretical framework to advance clinical practice. Zilcha-Mano, Mukulincer, and Shaver (2011) provide a thorough explanation of applying attachment theory to clinical therapy, but limit the discussion to collaborating with a pet in an office setting. In contrast, Bachi (2013) detailed the intersection of EFT and the application of attachment theory within the prevue of psychotherapy. Heeding her call to use her paper as a "reference to further theorize and explore the link between attachment theory and EFP" (Bachi 2013: 194), This paper refines the conversation of the prior author's works by applying attachment theory to EFT within the practice scope of social work.

Although few publications have attempted to ground EFT in theory (i.e. Bachi et al. 2011; Rothe et al. 2005), many authors state there is an absence of theoretical framework (Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, & Bowers 2007; Kemp, Signal, Bortros, Taylor, & Prentice, 2014; Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey 2008). Others have included multiple theories in their text, but then proceed to refute their purpose throughout the paper (Kidd & Kidd 1987). As a rebuttal, Messant (1987) published a reaction to Kidd & Kidd (1987) in which he states: "For any theory to become well established, the data must be of sufficient quality to test or support it.

As Beck and Katcher (1984) have commented, there has been a tendency for claims to be made in this field that go beyond the supporting data.” Indeed, this was a limitation of the field in the 1980s. However, the NIH Technology Assessment Conference of 1988 was a turning point by purposefully engaging in conversation that brought about opportunity for methodological challenges. As research rigor increased post-conference, the conversation also shifted to include quandaries specifically about theory. Now that the field is rich in research that has consistently been increasing in rigor, defining the theoretical framework is essential to implementation science and fidelity.

Authors who have applied a theoretical foundation have not been in consensus about which theory to use. Theories that have been extracted from published literature include but are not limited to: 1. psychoanalytic theory with a specific focus on gender roles, aggression, and developmental/executive functioning (Lentini & Knox 2009); 2. Rogerian theory which suggests that “at-risk” youths flourish within an environment of unconditional positive support (Kempt et al., 2014); 3. ecology theory which conceptualizes that if the environment changes, the person changes (Dunlop & Tsantefski 2017); 4. biophilia hypothesis which support the person-in-environment (Fine 2006; McCullough, Risley-Curtiss, & Rorke 2015); 5. attention restoration theory, similar to biophilia, suggests that mammals (humans) utilize their innate affinity for the natural world to connect with others and with nature thereby clearing away the chaos of the urban environment at which point the mind is able to calm and focus (Button 2010; Kaplan 1995). In an effort to engage the field of psychology in conversation, Amior and Bastian (2015) conducted a thorough review of the literature to provide an argument for the state of research on human–animal relations. The publication details the relationship between human-animal interaction and theory. By synthesizing the human-animal relationship as related to theory the authors detail the strengths and limitations, including evolutionary processes, development, normative factors, gender and individual differences, health and therapy, and intergroup relations.

The absence of a unified theoretical framework leaves the research foundation unstable. An example of the omission of a theoretical foundation is the study of EFT by Kemp et al. (2014). The study was a collaborative effort by the Department of Health and Human Services, Flinders University, and Phoenix House (the riding stable). Researchers evaluated the efficacy of EFT by implementing a pre and post-measurement of the Global Assessment of Functioning scores in a program at a sexual assault referral center in Queensland, Australia (Kemp et al. 2014). The study measured the effect on 30 individuals, 8–17 years of age, over a 9-week period. While the research produced findings in support of EFT, the publication presents minimal explanation of the conceptual framework of the study and entirely lacks a theoretical foundation. A theoretical foundation would have helped the researchers ground their study in a framework, hypothesize findings based on their chosen theory, and confirm whether their theory held up through the evaluative process. Without developing consensus about a unified theoretical foundation, the practice field will continue to perpetuate the underutilization of a potentially effective intervention.

Application of Attachment Theory

The purpose of theory is to understand the mechanisms of change within a person or environment. Each theory that has been applied to EFT can be rationalized to have some validity in its utility to analyze and/or explain a social problem. The primary theoretical approach that appropriately explains and describes the process of EFT in a holistic manner is attachment theory. As an asset to social workers, attachment theory is widely employed within social work and the AAT literature (Berget & Ihlebæk 2011; Fine, 2016). Throughout the developmental spectrum, attachment theory seeks to understand how people internalize interpersonal interactions and respond, especially in situations with emotional content (e.g., feeling hurt, threatened, scared, happy, loved). Bowlby (1969, 1982) defined the theory as existing (or not existing) between two or more people; however, we are arguing to expand the definition to include the relationship between horses and humans.

Bowlby's theory (1969, 1982) postulated three types of attachment between caregiver and infant: secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and ambivalent attachment. An attentive and consistent caregiver is thought to convey emotional regulation and security to the infant and result in the infant's development of a healthy self. Any disruption in attention and consistency can result in avoidant or ambivalent attachment, thought to be associated with difficulties in self-regulation, in developing relationships, and in self-concept.

The theory can be used to describe the importance of the horse-human bond and the use of the relationship as a therapeutic intervention. It also explains why youths who have engaged in EFT have found success and further predicts that the results are replicable. Youth develop relationships and attachments with horses similar to those with other people. A child who has not been raised with strong parental or adult relationships, may be more comfortable bonding with a horse. That assumption is the first stage in understanding EFT. Horses have the innate ability to be a facilitator in the learning and healing process regardless of barriers that typically marginalize and ostracize youth.

As opposed to human interactions, horse-human interactions are unique in that they unconditionally and nonjudgmentally support youths regardless of economic, social, cultural, linguistic, and/or physical ability, thus modeling the features that are associated with the development of secure attachment in infancy. Furthermore, interaction with a horse facilitates the therapeutic rapport between client and clinician by supporting empathy, resiliency, self-esteem, and self-control—deficits typically encountered in attachment disorder. With this intervention, the client's primary relationship is with the horse while the secondary relationship is with the social worker. The ability to create a relationship is directly correlated to the youth's ability, or lack of ability, to show or learn empathy (Bowlby, 1982). This complementarity between assets of the horse and the limitations of the client supports the use of attachment theory by clinicians to better understand and apply EFT to meet aspirations when working with youth.

Attachment theory as applied in EFT has been explicitly in prior research literature by Bachi (2013), Naste et al. (2017), Carlsson (2016). Bachi et al. (2011) also published a clinical trial for a 14-participant study on the influence on self-image, self-control, and trust which utilized attachment theory as the theoretical framework. Similarly, Sable (2013) authored a theoretical paper about application

of attachment theory, though its focus is domestic pets influence throughout the lifespan.

One tenet of attachment theory is the development of resiliency, which is achieved through peer-based interactions that increase protective factors. Key features that promote skill development include access to positive role models, safe space, opportunities to learn and develop skills, peer-shared experiences, and building a sense of attachment and belonging. A primary component of EFT and overall equine partnership is respect in the stable for other adults, peers, and animals. The stable encourages overt safety, which helps instill mental and physical safety and encourages protective factors that promote resilience for at-risk youth (Carlsson 2016). Riders have role models of personal development, employment, and skill (riding). Every day, whether riding or ground work, is met with skill development, shared experiences, and when implemented correctly, a sense of attachment and belonging (Bachi 2013).

Transitional object theory, a component of attachment theory, postulates that the horse is the element through which issues and experiences are processed (Burgon, 2011). Equine Assisted Growth and Learning, a national certifying organization, uses this conceptual framework at the core of its curriculum – though not explicitly stated (EAGALA 2015). The practice of EFT assumes that the horse is a living being with which clients develop an intimate relationship. This relationship is both symbolic and explicit of the past and of challenges the client has faced mentally, emotionally, and physically. The horse, through the support of the social worker, helps the client overcome the effects of problematic past experiences and relationships by offering a safe, nurturing, unconditionally supportive environment to self-identify with their intrinsic strengths (EAGALA 2016).

Delving further into attachment theory, Bowlby (1982) refers to the holding theory, which explains EFT as the embodiment of safe-touch. Where touch may have been threatening, violent, painful, or altogether absent for at-risk youths, the horse serves as a safe physical contact void of other humans. The size difference between newborn and mother proposed by Winnicott is similar to the youth and horse, thus mirroring the touch that should have been present and setting a new foundation to form a relationship (Burgon 2011; Naste et al. 2017). A primary component of the equine partnership is physical touch and sensitivity. Horses provide a safe and comfortable way to explore appropriate touch, with both patience and a low tolerance for negativity (Kempton et al. 2014; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins 2007).

Within social work, attachment theory provides a foundation to explain and predict the anticipated outcomes of EFT. This also calls upon social workers to obtain credentials or appropriate training to learn about horses and their body language (i.e. EAGALA, PATH International). With an innate understanding of the horse as a therapeutic collaborator, the social worker can use EFT to support the client in developing a healthy relationship in a safe environment of the stable.

Application of Practice Engagement with the Client

Attachment theory can guide the decision to use EFT, if clients have disorders with associated attachment disruptions and resulting problems with emotional

self-regulation. If EFT is appropriate, the same rigor and process should be used to determine goals and indicators as with any other social work intervention. Exposure and experience with interpersonal violence affects the developmental outcomes of youth. While many young people can overcome adversity and develop resiliency, many benefit from additional support to achieve success. Youth in western, urban culture are tasked to grow up feigning confidence while facing multiple stressors and marginalization. The level of exhibited confidence does not directly correlate to their level of self-esteem. “Self-esteem refers to a general feeling of self-worth or self-value, while self-confidence is the feeling that an individual is likely to succeed in a task and has few hesitations or reservations about attempting it” (Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker 2005: 90). This is crucial from a clinical perspective, because it is self-esteem that clinicians seek to develop after an experience with interpersonal violence. Adolescents' experienced or perceived support can be sparse, especially for those with attachment deficits. This is potentially worrisome, because youths can embody confidence while entirely void of self-esteem, confidence, and relationship-building skills to support independence and success in their adult world.

While some youth in need of a therapeutic intervention may be connected to resources, they still may not be willing to engage in traditional therapy. This is the classic “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink”; a child may sit in a therapist’s office, but may not want or understand how to talk about their challenges. “[Horses] offer a form of non-threatening, non-judgmental, reassuring non-verbal communication and comfort and thus help to break the vicious cycle of loneliness helplessness, and social withdrawal” (Burgon 2014: 15). Children may find it easier and more comfortable to develop a relationship with the horse than with another human being, especially if they have been victims of abuse or when other people were a threat and have been a source of danger. In social work perspective, horses are a potentially important tool for youth who are suffering from trauma and distress, in that they have the capacity to offer healthy attachment experiences (Tedeschi, Fitchett & Molitor 2005; Walsh 2009), and the acquisition of empathy (Poresky 1990).

The Team Approach

EFT is a complementary practice of incorporating horses into the clinical environment—not substituting horses for a social worker. Clinicians have two primary methods for working with horses: on the ground, or on horseback. Both methods require a team approach including a licensed clinical social worker and an EFT-certified instructor. Individuals can be certified by PATH International or EAGALA as instructors to work directly with clients to teach horse skills and guide interactions (PATH International 2015). Within the United States, many facilities are accredited by PATH International, which means that the facility maintains a standard of care and practice.

Typically, when the client arrives, they are met by the social worker who will stay with them through the full session. Each session with a client is staffed by the team. The EFT personnel is involved in the session, but not overtly engaged with the client. The EFT personnel can be referred to as an instructor, coach, leader, or other variation. While the title may differ, the responsibility is consistent: ensure the safety of the client with the horse, provide general instruction for working with

the horse during the session, and support the client-clinician relationship, and (EAGALA 2015; PATH International 2015). The social worker is responsible for discussing or translating the horses' reaction with the client, and ensuring the client is progressing along their goals. Some social workers choose to maintain both clinical licensure and instructor certification, though it is not necessary. Accrediting bodies do not recommend forgoing the team approach to have one clinician serve as both the social worker and instructor (EAGALA 2015).

Having two different skill sets between the social worker and the equine instructor, and different roles in the session allows for a holistic view that may not be available with only one perspective (EAGALA 2015; PATH International 2015). A key therapeutic quality horses provide is the ability to *mirror* (Naste et al. 2017). Horses have an uncanny ability to read and react to human's body language with quick response that they appear to *mirror* the person they are interacting with. The team should have the skills to read their horse's body language. For example, while the client may not discuss the stress they feel, the social worker could point out the signs of stress in the horse that the horse is actually exhibiting as a byproduct of their interaction. Thus, the horse provides the social worker, equine instructor, and client with immediate and often accurate feedback (Burgon 2011; EAGALA 2015; PATH International 2015; Trotter 2001).

As an AAT, EFT includes explicit goals that are detailed in a treatment plan and progress notes. Youth work with the social worker to set goals for their riding/time with the horse; those goals are translated into transferable skills. Each goal set by the team should be carefully determined to identify the purpose, the skills needed to achieve the goal, and an ending benchmark for success. Together, each independent goal becomes the client's unique theory of change representative of the youth's trajectory from where they begin their process, through where and when they choose to end. For example, what may be perceived as a simple task of grooming a horse (Image 1) takes courage, patience, and trial and error, listening to direction, and successful completion of task.

Image 1

Young student grooming a pony at urban, inner-city EAGALA program

Another example may be for the child to mount and walk around the arena sitting upright and calm in the saddle with their hands holding the reins gently. To be successful, the youth (as a rider) needs to achieve physical strength to mount the horse, have clear communication with the horse to give direction and cadence of movement, have enough self-control to remain calm in the saddle, and have the patience to support the horse to go where they want. When the social worker and youth agree that the goal is achieved, they may also note gains self-esteem for accomplishing a self-set goal, physical strength, physical control, mental control, patience, and communication skills. Above all else is the acquisition of trust for the instructor and clinician, enabled by the horse; which is full circle to the base of attachment theory.

Both riding and ground work activities focus on physical boundaries, control, and personal space, vocalization of wants and needs, and collaboration (EAGALA 2015). Sessions on the ground consist of working with the horse as a partner, side-by-side. Based on individual goals, some clients benefit from working with the horse on the ground rather than on the horse's back, some clients make the choice not to

ride. Activities on the ground typically ask clients to infer what a horse wants, thinks, or is seeking, also referred to as anthropomorphism (Carlsson 2016). As a psychosocial intervention, the process of EFT allows space for the client to identify with the supposed emotions of the horse (e.g., “she looks lonely”, “he wants to run!”). Similar to the physical mirroring of body language, the idea is that the client is asserting their emotions onto the horse which may be viewed as a protective factor rather than talking about their concerns or burdens overtly. Together, the team works through the projected emotions, strengths, and challenges of the client’s behavior, personality, and relationships with the horse.

Case Study

To further explain the importance of client engagement through the team approach a case study is provided. Upon asking a licensed clinical social worker at an EAGALA certified program about her most poignant reflection, she readily responded with the story of Josh (name changed for anonymity):

Josh started attending [the program] shortly before I joined as the clinical social worker. One day, Josh arrived after an admission from the inpatient hospital: he had tried to hang himself. He had been considered a troublemaker, but his family did not have the means to take him to get a clinical diagnosis. And, the urban school district similarly saw him as a troublesome pre-teen; not as someone in need of clinical intervention. It is probable that Josh had multiple DSM diagnosis, one of which was likely conduct disorder.

After his suicide attempt, he continued to live with his mother, step-father, and brothers even though it was apparent that the environment was toxic to him. His mother was overwhelmed and his step-father was best described as a bully. We held team meetings to discuss Josh’s behavioral outbursts at school, and home. Meetings included the riding instructor, barn manager, owner, and myself. Our program staff attended his academic Planning and Placement Team meetings at his school to share his improving behavior in the barn. We believed these positive behaviors could be mirrored in class with the right supports. We knew that if we could better understand his school day, we could do more to help him in the program. For Josh, our presence at school and sharing his behaviors in the barn with the school personnel helped solidify secure attachment with the adults in the program. He began to look to program staff and fellow peers as friends and family as a source of secure relationship for him.

Once attending the riding program regularly, his depression symptoms decreased. He constantly tested the limits of the barn rules and staff, which we knew was necessary to allow him to learn in his own time that he was safe in the barn. He started spending additional days at the barn after-school and on the weekend. Year over year, he became more confident, calm, and a great rider. He would ride many of the horses, but he did have his horse – Chance.

The horses, they saved him. They taught him about natural consequences and unconditional love – something I am certain he would not have found,

nor accepted so readily elsewhere. This is a central component to the program, the relationship building with the horse.

Josh recently finished a degree at prestigious university where he was accepted on full scholarship. He graduated, became a successful farrier, and has returned to his home community and program where he is now the barn manager and serves as a role model for the new and rising youth.

In this vignette, the key tenants of attachment theory are noted by the social worker and applied to the shared practice. For example, the social worker begins the story by noting the Josh's negative behavior and the potential impact of his experiences (i.e. probable mental health diagnosis). Throughout the narrative, nods towards the importance of a safe and consistent environment are explicitly stated. The information about Josh's step-father being a "bully" likely impacted his bond with the horse. Overtime, Chance provided a space for safe-touch as well as the opportunity to learn "natural consequences" which helped foster the Josh's confidence while also learning about appropriate boundaries. Through the team approach, the social worker was able to provide a secure base for Josh to thrive. Together they helped him apply these learned skills to environments outside of the stable so that he was able to be successful in college. Years later, Josh was confident enough in himself and his environment to graduate from college, and return to serve as a role model for others.

Conclusion

Critics have charged that EFT lacks a firm, unified theoretical and research base (Bachi 2013; Carlsson 2016; Messant 1987). Indeed, the absence of a unified theoretical framework leaves the research foundation unstable. EFT requires a theoretical explanation of the holistic process, not merely its parts. Heeding Bachi's (2013) call to use her paper as a "reference to further theorize and explore the link between attachment theory and EFP" (p. 194), this paper refines the conversation of the prior author's works by applying attachment theory to EFT within the practice scope of social work specifically for youths living in poverty and exposed to inter-personal violence. Furthermore, this review intentionally used a social work lens to review existing literature and support the application attachment theory to EFT as a clinical intervention.

Attachment theory, in its broadest sense explains the bond in the horse-human interaction wherein the horse models a secure base through unconditional and nonjudgmental support youths regardless of economic, social, cultural, linguistic, and/or physical ability. Use of this curated relationship facilitates the therapeutic rapport between client and clinician by supporting empathy, resiliency, self-esteem, and self-control. This complementarity between assets of the horse and the limitations of the client supports the use of attachment theory.

Second, transitional object theory, a vital mechanism of attachment theory, should be acknowledged and accounted for by the social worker throughout the intervention. it serves the client as a symbolic and explicit vector to process past and present challenges. With the support of the social worker, by offering a safe, nurturing, unconditionally supportive environment to self-identify with their intrinsic strengths (EAGALA 2016), the horse helps the client overcome perceived and identified challenges.

Third, holding theory is an additional mechanism of attachment theory which specifically addresses the association of EFT and safe-touch. Where physical contact may have been threatening, violent, painful, or altogether absent for the client, the horse serves as a safe physical-being to explore physical contact and connection void of other humans.

With the growing state of research, empirical and theoretical, a cautionary measure of using EFT as a complementary intervention, or for those who are not reached by conventional methods (Lentini & Knox 2009) seems far more reasonable than avoiding the intervention outright until data confirms its effect (Anestis et al. 2014). Within social work, attachment theory, inclusive of transitional object theory and holding theory, provides a foundation to explain and predict the anticipated outcomes of EFT; facets of a strong theoretical framework. Thus, attachment theory can therefore guide more rigorous inquiry to evaluate effects in mental health treatment. As EFT and the use of horses as therapeutic collaborators continues to increase, the literature on implementation science and program evaluation will also continue to grow more robust. Social work clinicians are stakeholders in all aspects of the EFT intervention. Vocalizing the need for quality research and participation in research opportunities is within our code of ethics.

EFT has demonstrated its utility to support social work clinicians and vulnerable youth. Horses facilitate the learning of responsibility, unconditional love, self-efficacy, required helpfulness, responsibility, self-esteem, confidence, empathy, resilience, and emotional intelligence (PATH International 2015). “The horse is especially effective in psychotherapeutic work because it is an animal of great power and grace: yet it is also one of inherent vulnerability” (Burgon 2011). Moving forward, theory – notably attachment theory—must guide the development of the research agenda to support a robust and generalizable body of knowledge about EFT and its benefits.

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